

Introduction

Chinyman

He moves haphazardly, blown along the pavement

In uneven gusts, like rice paper.

The oldest man in the world.

Not for him, beneath the mask of grey

Enamelled hair, dried dreams of palaces

Floating on their pools of silken poetry

Or orchideous concubines in rites of silk.

More likely a drab exchange of servitude,

Eastern soil for saltfish,

And the crudely offered tithes paid daily

On the mackerel counters by us lazy blacks

Who'd rather spend than sell;

The necessary sacrifice of language

And the timeless shame of burial

In this uncultured soil.

Yet in this intricate embroidery of that face

Are all the possibilities of legend:

Kublai Khan in beggar's garb.

Loub-limbed and less immediately ancient

I defer the pavement to this parchment schooner

With no port, this ivory chorale of semitones.

—MARTIN MORDECAI

If Martin Mordecai's poem "Chinyman" seems familiar on first reading, it is hardly surprising. The poem is built, after all, around a sense of jarring dislocation concerning the presence of a Chinese man in the West Indies, and the Chinese are not often the first ethnic community that comes to mind when one thinks of West Indian spaces.¹ Indeed, the poem's imagery suggests that the Chinese man is not only displaced but that his presence in the West Indies is extremely tenuous: he moves "haphazardly," is deemed "port-less," and is so rootless that he is likely to be blown

away as easily as parchment paper. He is, as the poem suggests, the false note in his environment. And yet, the picture of Chinese alienation that Mordecai so effectively constructs is subtly undermined in the poem's closing lines when the narrator defers his own place on the pavement to make room for the Chinese man. In this moment of accommodation, the ideas of estrangement and dislocation in which "Chineseness" has been constructed throughout the poem are subverted: apparently, there *is* room for the Chinese man in the West Indies. Thus, Chineseness as embodied by the "Chinyman" becomes a site of ambiguity, caught in the tension of belonging and nonbelonging; and it is this ambiguity pertaining to the literary representations of the Chinese in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana that is the focus of this book.

To consider the question of belonging and nonbelonging in relation to Chinese West Indians is not, of course, abstract. Instead, belonging is located in the greater concept of nation. This book examines fiction produced in the West Indies from the earliest part of the twentieth century until contemporary times as a means of exploring and understanding the strategies and agendas behind the ways in which the Chinese are imagined within the greater construction of West Indian nationhood. At its simplest, the question at the heart of this study is: What do twentieth-century fictional images of the Chinese reveal about the construction and articulation of nationhood in the former West Indian colonies?

Before addressing this question, we must start with another: Why the nation? After all, has not the nation become irrelevant in this globalized era? Have we not been challenged to "think ourselves beyond the nation"?² Certainly, as many scholars have pointed out, national borders seem to be blurring as individuals, capital, ideas, and loyalties criss-cross the globe. Nevertheless, despite such mobility and seeming permeability of national borders, these borders have not disappeared. Indeed, as I write this chapter, new rules have just been instituted at the world's longest unguarded border, that between Canada and the United States, which, for the first time, require all Canadians to show their

passports before entering the United States.³ National borders are apparently not only still in existence but are becoming more clearly defined.

The rupture in the academic debate over the existence of the nation and its future lies in a tension between the political and the cultural. Whether or not one believes that the nation is on the wane often relates to whether or not one is speaking about a political entity or a more cultural concept. The nation-state, that political body that controls borders, may be facing new challenges to its power, but the nation as a cultural identity continues to have a powerful hold on our imaginations. One need only think of the Olympic Games to see this tension clearly: many of the competitors train and live in different nations from the one under whose flag they proudly compete.

My examination of West Indian nationhood investigates a cultural phenomenon and a social practice. It seeks to map and understand a cultural process of identity formation: “Chineseness” in the West Indies. Thus, the subject matter under investigation is essentially cultural production. Additionally, many of the texts to be explored were written in the early- and mid-twentieth century when the colonies were moving steadily toward independence. It was a period in which an awareness of nationhood was a central component of the sociopolitical environment. Such texts are often particularly interested in revealing or participating in the process of nation-building. Finally, whether or not the nation-state exists today in the form in which it was understood to exist in the early twentieth century, the relationships between individuals within (former) nation-states have long-term implications. In the same way that the implications of colonialism are still being felt long after the colonies ceased to exist as political units, the relationships between Chinese and other West Indians that were founded when the concept of the nation was more secure do not just disappear even if the idea of nation itself has changed. Thus, nation remains an appropriate—perhaps even the best—context against which this exploration into images of Chineseness in the West Indies takes place.

The moment of encounter between the Chinyman and the speaker in Mordecai's poem—an encounter that is not only literal but also represents a coming together of ideas and images—that ambiguous moment when various narratives of Chineseness collide to produce “all the possibilities of legend” is suggestive of my overall approach to this study. I want to foreground an understanding of nation space as a creative “zone of instability” within which writers work with “multiple, heterogeneous, and in many cases contradictory discourses and practices” in shaping their production of the nation's cultural identity.⁴ As will be discussed in more detail in the subsequent chapter, these discourses and practices are directly related to the conditions of modernity in which West Indian nations came into being. In particular, because they are formerly colonized countries intensely aware of their global connections, some of the foundational concepts of modern national identities, such as a belief in mythic links between landscape, history, and culture as the basis of an organically emerging cultural identity, are destabilized. This destabilization renders the nation an intrinsically unfinished “problematic” and those narratives that establish who belongs in the nation to be equally unfinished.⁵ What I am interested in, however, is not the inherent ambiguity of nation caught in the act of self-mythologization; that is, I am not interested in exposing the falseness of a homogenous nation-self as the ultimate product of national narrative. Instead, I want to connect the ambiguity of the concept of nation directly to the multiplicity of narratives that are employed in the articulation of national identity as a state of belonging. In emphasizing this multiplicity, I want to consider the ambiguous images of Chinese belonging that appear in West Indian literature as a product of the varied ways in which belonging and nonbelonging for West Indian nations in general are imagined. There is more than one way to imagine the boundaries of national belonging, and the fictional images of the Chinese capture this inherent instability.

Historical Context of Ambiguous Belonging

NINETEENTH-CENTURY CHINESE MIGRATION TO THE WEST INDIES

The ambiguous images of Chineseness in relation to nationhood that appear in West Indian literature arise not only from the peculiar pressures of modern nationhood. The particular migration history of the Chinese has also contributed to the instability surrounding the roles in which they are cast in national narratives. Chinese migration to the West Indies began in the nineteenth century as an indentured labor phenomenon and was therefore intrinsically intertwined with colonial ambitions to maintain the plantation economies that were the foundation of their power and privilege. These economies had, however, been significantly disrupted when the slaves were emancipated in 1833 and their mandatory apprenticeships concluded five years later. A further shake-up for the sugar industry, the backbone of the West Indian economy, had occurred in 1846 when the Sugar Duties Act was passed, removing measures that had protected West Indian-produced sugar from competition with other sugar sources, including European beet sugar and sugar produced by slaves elsewhere, most notably in Cuba. These two blows, often coupled with soil depletion on plantations, caused the sugar industry to fall into such severe decline that by 1850, it could be claimed that sugar estates in the West Indies had devalued an incredible 90 percent in a ten-year period, and that three-fourths of West Indian planters were on the verge of absolute financial ruin.⁶

Despite the impact of these significant changes in the world sugar market and, in some cases, the damage to West Indian soil caused by the overproduction of sugar, the dire financial state in which the colonies found themselves by the mid-nineteenth century was commonly blamed on a perceived lack of controlled labor on the sugar estates since slave emancipation. Planters sought a new source of labor that, while allowing the laborer

to be nominally free, would provide them with controls over the workforce similar to those they had wielded during slavery. Indentured labor, which provided measures to control mobility and directly addressed absenteeism in its contracts, soon appeared to be the solution to this problem, or as one writer put it more poetically:

Immigration to this province may be likened to supplying with water a reservoir employed to afford power to extensive mechanical appliances; when the supply is abundant, the machinery will work up to its full power; but, when it proves to be deficient, when the source is obstructed by any circumstances, the water in the reservoir will sink below its working level and the machinery will stop.⁷

China was just one of a number of locations that the colonial government considered as a potential source for indentured labor. Eventually, India would become the primary—and perhaps most well-known—source of such labor; nevertheless, Chinese indentured labor precedes that from India when, in 1806, 192 Chinese arrived in Trinidad to work on the sugar estates. This first batch of Chinese indentured laborers would not, however, form the real basis upon which the Chinese populations of the West Indies would be founded. Indeed, most of these migrants left upon the completion of their contracts. It has been estimated that as early as 1809 only thirty Chinese were left on the island, with this number dwindling to about a dozen by 1825.⁸ Interest in the Chinese as potential indentured laborers for the West Indies would not be revived until the 1840s, although actual indentured labor migration did not recommence until 1853.

The bulk of Chinese indentured labor migration to the West Indies occurred between 1853 and 1866. This migration did not, however, continue in a steady stream over this period. For example, the three-year period between 1855 and 1858 saw no Chinese migrants enter the colonies. Nevertheless, by the end of the nineteenth century, some 18,000 Chinese would arrive in the West Indies, with the vast majority of those migrants (around

75 percent) headed for Guyana. As was the case with most migration out of China in the nineteenth century, the immigrants were drawn from southern China and were seeking to escape desperate conditions caused by a combination of environmental catastrophes and political unrest. Canton (Guangzhou) provided many of the immigrants, although Swatow (Shantou) and Amoy (Xiamen) were eventually considered more valuable centers in terms of recruiting the type of people who were thought to be good laborers as opposed to what one observer described as “the worthless population of the towns.”⁹ The migrants were a diverse group that included individuals from a variety of ethnic groups and social and economic classes. Members of the Hakka, Punti, and Hok Lo ethnic groups have been specifically identified as participating in the migration, and it was suggested that there were representatives from 150 occupations, including doctors and schoolmasters, among the migrants in the colony.¹⁰ There were also a considerable number of Christian converts among the migrants as a result of the colonial government’s willingness to rely on Christian missionaries to assist them in their recruitment endeavors, particularly in the recruiting of family units.¹¹

The use of Christian missionaries in recruitment was just one of many measures that the colonial government used in its bid to avoid accusations that indenture was simply slavery under a new name. The government was particularly sensitive to such accusations because it was competing directly with other European powers, particularly Spain, to recruit laborers from China. In general, the recruitment of Chinese laborers was done by professional recruiters, known as “crimps,” who were paid per individual recruit, while the recruits themselves received a cash advance. Arnold J. Meagher argues that although the use of crimps to recruit Chinese labor had emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century, it was not until the late 1850s when both the demand for Chinese labor and the fees paid to crimps had increased dramatically that the system became notorious for its association with abuse and coercion, including kidnapping. Indeed, so bad was the perception of crimp-controlled

migration that it was said to be known among the Chinese as “the sale of Little Pigs,” a particularly vivid means of capturing the lack of choice that many of the “migrants” had with regard to their migration and the inhumane treatment that they often faced. This “recruitment,” along with the treatment that the migrants received, deteriorated so much that in 1874, a Chinese commission was sent to Cuba to investigate the conditions of the Chinese there. Their findings would ultimately end Chinese indentured labor on that island.¹²

In contrast, Chinese indentured immigration to the British West Indies had been permitted only under the condition that the colonial government would retain control over the process (as opposed to allowing it to be run by individual prospectors), and by 1859, the period in which the most organized and heaviest indentured migration from China began, a different recruitment system from that being used by Spain had been established. This system relied on British immigration officials who, with the assistance of Chinese officials, worked out of emigration houses where migrants were interviewed before leaving the country as a means of ensuring that they were migrating of their own free will.¹³

Through various ordinances, the colonial government’s involvement in Chinese indentured labor migration extended far beyond recruitment. For example, ordinances were passed that determined the size of the ships that could carry migrants to the colonies while others specified the rights and responsibilities of both laborer and estate management upon the migrants’ arrival in the colonies. Indeed, on a superficial level, the government involvement seemed to ensure that the migrants were well-treated,

... provided with free house-room, regular work and wages when they are in health, and in sickness have the advantages of a hospital, the attendance of a medical man and medicines free of expense, who have moreover a magistrate always at hand to hear their complaints and a department of officers with especial duty of securing their good treatment.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the indenture system was not immune from accusations that it perpetrated a new slavery. Despite the Colonial Office's precautions, for example, the recruitment process was still suspect. Mr. Sampson, the emigration agent in Canton during the 1860s, noted that despite the care he took in processing migrants, he knew of at least one instance of "a tolerably clear case of kidnapping" that had almost escaped his notice, suggesting that it was certainly possible for other unwilling migrants to have passed through the system.¹⁵ Even more troubling was the practice of providing additional advance money for women migrants, a measure introduced because it was believed that it was only with such an incentive that Chinese females could be induced or permitted to participate in the migration. Although the initial proposal had been greeted negatively with the fear that such a practice would provide an "opening for the greatest abuses, and in fact to set on foot a trade little different from the Slave Trade," the advancement of such money was eventually allowed.¹⁶ Those fears seemed to have been more than justified as a significant proportion of Chinese women brought to the colonies were described variously as "refuse" and

. . . mere outcasts, filled into the ships by Chinese agency from the dregs of Chinese life, and in such respect of age and personal defects and infirmities, that to enumerate them in the proportion of women required for the help and solace of men seems like little better than mockery.¹⁷

The ship's surgeon on the *Whirlwind* was even more specific when he described the female migrants on his ship as consisting of "two notorious prostitutes, four idiots, one helpless cripple—one hunchback—one deaf and dumb, and several much disfigured by scars," and the 1862 Report of the Agent General of Immigrants in Trinidad complained that "for the most part [the Chinese migrants had] repudiated the wives whom they picked up at Hong Kong . . . with a view of sharing in or appropriating their advance money."¹⁸

Two of the most well known nineteenth-century criticisms

of indentured labor in the West Indies were an 1871 pamphlet entitled *The New Slavery: An Account of the Indian and Chinese Immigrants in British Guiana* and a letter by G. William Des Voeux, a former magistrate in British Guiana, to the then colonial secretary, Lord Granville. In his somewhat spontaneous letter, Des Voeux claimed that the indentured laborers were so badly treated in British Guiana that the colony faced imminent revolution. In response, the Colonial Office established a royal commission charged with investigating two main points: first, whether the indentured laborers had been recruited under false promises of the wages they could make and the conditions under which they would labor and, second, whether or not the legal system in the colony was so biased that the laborers were unable to get justice and the legal provisions designed to protect them were, as such, ineffectual.

Despite the commissioners' somewhat patronizing attitude toward the indentured laborers and their biased assumption that all "Asiatics" were inherently given to untruth and exaggeration, their report provides considerable insight into the distressful conditions faced by the immigrants, ranging from a failure to make promised wages, to poor housing and medical care, to the extremely harsh penal provisions for breaches of contract. Also striking is the revelation of the casual violence that marked their everyday lives. For example, the commissioners were particularly disturbed to hear of the murder of one Low-A-Si, an indentured laborer on Plantation Annandale, who after refusing to work, either due to bad health or fatigue, was beaten to death by the head overseer and the driver. Indeed, following the commission's investigation, one observer was forced to conclude:

Politically, we have ascertained, the Coolie is nil; he has no voice, nor the shadow of a voice, in the government of British Guiana. Socially he is not only a laborer, he is a bondsman—using the word in no invidious sense—he is not free to come and go, to work and rest, as he pleases.¹⁹

One of the complaints addressed by the commissioners was the

lack of provision for back passage (that is, return passage) for the Chinese migrants in their contracts. Some of the Chinese laborers had claimed that, like the migrants from India, back passage had been promised to them by recruiters in China. Although the commissioners ultimately decided that such promises had never been made, the issue of back passages would continue to be a sore point that would eventually play a key role in ending Chinese indentured labor to the West Indies. In 1866, the Kung Convention signed in China, but never ratified in Britain, specifically provided back passage provisions for the Chinese laborers. West Indian planters were not, however, prepared to cover the additional cost that this would incur, especially in light of the fact that India was proving more than sufficient as a source of migrant labor. After the Chinese government refused to back down on the provision, interest in the Chinese as indentured laborers seems to have simply faded. Indeed, after 1866, only three vessels of Chinese indentured laborers would arrive in the West Indies: two to Guyana and one to Jamaica.

COLONIAL DISCOURSE AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY REPRESENTATIONS OF CHINESENESS

The manner in which the colonial powers introduced the Chinese into the West Indies and the socioeconomic roles that they afforded to the migrants would directly affect how the Chinese were imagined and represented in colonial discourse in terms of where they belonged in the West Indies' social, economic, and political landscapes. Indeed, these images reveal a long-term ambivalence in representing the Chinese as belonging in the region. Much of this ambivalence arises from what Homi K. Bhabha memorably described as the "forked tongue" of colonial discourse. In that image, Bhabha vividly captured the tension engendered by the disconnect between British colonialism's avowed moral project—its "civilizing mission"—and its desire to retain the unequal power hierarchies of colonial societies. Bhabha concluded that, produced at "the intersection between European learning and colonial power," the colonized

Other becomes a subject of “double articulation”—that is, a “forked tongue”—represented as both having and not having the potential to actually become “civilized.”²⁰

Colonial images of the Chinese in the West Indies display a similar doubling. For example, one of the most overused images in colonial documents considering Chinese indentured migration to the West Indies was that of the Chinese as an inherently gentle and submissive people: as a “cheerful, peaceable and well-disposed” people who demonstrate “docility and obedience,” as well as “regular order, obedience and industry, together with a perfect degree of reconciliation, confidence and happiness”; and, importantly, as being “too sensible to be led away into riots.”²¹ This image is, however, destabilized by the concurrent tales of Chinese violence, including the violence directed at those involved in the recruitment of Chinese laborers and the numerous mutinies on the ships carrying the laborers to the Americas.²² Similarly, the popular colonial depiction of the Chinese as a particularly industrious people who would save the plantations through their “indefatigable industry” and “indomitable industry and perseverance” is subverted by complaints that the Chinese laborers were too “independent”—that is, less submissive and controllable—in terms of their attitude toward estate management²³. For example, one of the observers of the royal commission recounts how, during a tour of a sugar plantation, he and the manager came across an apparently healthy Chinese male who was not working but merely amusing himself with a group of Chinese ladies. When the manager makes a subtle hint that the Chinese man should be working, the laborer responds coolly, “No. No think work.”²⁴ The moment is significant for the negative tone in which it is related. It reveals that by removing himself from the role accorded to him in colonial discourses, namely as an industrious laborer, this unnamed Chinese man also removes himself from being represented as having a valid place in the West Indies. There were also complaints that the Chinese were particularly prone to absconding from the estates. Indeed, one of the concerns raised regarding the 1865 establish-

ment of Hopetown, a free Chinese village in Guyana, was that it would prove a haven and a goal for runaway laborers. The apparently high rate of suicide for the Chinese during this period can also be read as an act of resistance against the harsh and denigrating labor situation in which they found themselves.

The instability in the representation of the Chinese is particularly apparent in the uneven way in which ideas of Chinese assimilation to British norms and values were articulated in colonial discourse. Great attention was paid, for example, to evidence of Chinese conversion to Christianity. This is perhaps not surprising since one of the colonial justifications for Chinese indentured labor was the claim that exposure to Christianity would inevitably, in some never clearly explained fashion, bring about the conversion of the migrants. It was confidently stated, for example, that once in the West Indies, the Chinese would “very soon from Conviction embrace a persuasion established in the Divine Principles of General and Universal Benevolence and Charity in preference to a Continuance in their own Incongruous and [illegible word] Doctrines”; “unlearn something of the practices of their own country, and be brought into contact with the influences of Christianity and of a civilization comparatively European”; and “under the influence of a civilized condition of a society, forego their home and forget their gods.”²⁵ More specifically:

The defenders of the Asiatic immigration to the West Indies have always been careful to point out, besides the material advantages offered to the immigrant, the prospect of moral improvement which it opened to the races. It has been held upon as a means of carrying Western civilization and even Western faith to the nations of India and China.²⁶

The conversion of the “Heathen Chinees” was therefore understood to confirm the superiority of European civilization and culture, which, in turn, also confirmed the social and cultural hierarchy of the colonies.²⁷ Thus, as early as 1853 an explicit link between positive representations of the Chinese in the West In-

dies and their involvement with Christianity was being made. In Guyana, Governor Henry Barkly enthused that the first Chinese immigrants were “participating in the services at a missionary chapel,” a fact that led directly to his conclusion that “the Chinese [possess] the energy and the intelligence attributed to them.”²⁸ More typically, favorable representations of the Chinese were grounded in a comparison with the migrants from India who were proving less amenable to conversion. It was even explicitly suggested that China was a better source of emigrants than India because the Chinese seemed more willing to accept Christian instruction, while one missionary based his description of the Chinese as “pious” and “*gentil*” on the amount of the money they were willing to offer the church.²⁹ A newspaper article reporting on an execution of two migrants, one Indian and the other one Chinese, provided colonialists with a more dramatic contrast between supposed Indian and Chinese attitudes toward Christianity. On their last night alive, the Indian migrant refused to listen to any clergyman and spent his final hours dancing in his cell; in contrast, the Chinese prisoner spent the night attentively listening to the prayers of the Roman Catholic priest who would eventually accompany him on the scaffold.³⁰ That such a story would even make the news suggests how important the image of Chinese conversion was to colonial discourses that sought to justify and maintain the power structures within their societies.

The possibility of assimilation and, thereby, of belonging in the West Indies that is suggested in the representation of the Chinese converts also extended outside of religious matters. Other depictions of the Chinese during this period take particular care to present the Chinese as absorbing other aspects of European cultural norms and values. In this regard, a surprising amount of attention is given in colonial texts to reporting that the Chinese community was willing to dress in accordance with European standards of fashion. For example, during his tour of Trinidad, Charles Kingsley records his encounter with a group of Chinese women who were not only attending a church ser-

vice but were attired in expensive European-styled finery, and in Guyana, Barkly was pleased to report that the Chinese were apparently purchasing articles of European clothing. Another example of the importance given to representing the Chinese as assimilating to European values can be found in the memoirs of Henry Kirke, a former sheriff of Demerara. Kirke recounts a story of attending a dinner hosted by a Chinese man where he was impressed to note that he was served Hennessy XXX brandy. More important in this regard, Kirke also details his host's reaction to the suggestion that Chinese eat dogs. The man became quite agitated, insisting that only "bad" Chinese do so. This division between "good" and "bad" Chinese on the grounds of whether or not they behaved in accordance with European standards of behavior suggests that the host understood well the terms under which the Chinese could be represented as "good" within nineteenth-century West Indian colonial discourse. Simply put, the "good Chinese" were the assimilated Chinese; and only the "good Chinese" could belong in the West Indies.

Despite such images, colonial discourse never pictured the Chinese as fully assimilated, subverting its own discursive constructs with contemporaneous images of Chinese unassimilability. This strategy of portraying the Chinese as "almost the same, *but not quite*" reaffirmed the continued lower status of the Chinese to the European elements of West Indian society; the Chinese are never their peers.³¹ These images also affected perceptions of Chinese belonging, for, by representing them as unassimilable and exotic, such images reified cultural difference as the key factor in marking out the Chinese as outsiders in West Indian space. Thus, nineteenth-century newspaper articles spent considerable time reporting on Chinese dietary choices, suggesting that they ate frogs, cats, rats, and, of course, dogs, while other writers of the period insisted that the Chinese were actually not giving up traditional styles of clothing or traditional ways of eating with chopsticks.³² Such images essentially depict the Chinese as an alien presence in West Indian societies to the extent that Chinese alienation became a literary trope.

Indeed, so recognizable was this image, that Kingsley easily used it in his own work. Specifically, Kingsley recounts attending the races in Trinidad where he was disturbed by the amount of rum and general frivolity that he observed. In his account, Kingsley is careful to note the presence of a Chinese man who, like Kingsley, remains at a physical distance from the boisterous crowd. Although the two men do not apparently engage in conversation, Kingsley insists that the Chinese man is “absorbed in the very same reflection” that he is.³³ In doing so, the Chinese man becomes the embodiment of Kingsley’s own feelings of alienation and a figure whose presence intensifies the sense of estrangement with which Kingsley paints the scene.

Ultimately, in colonial discourse, ambivalence regarding Chinese belonging was connected to whether or not the migrants were perceived as supporting the colonial order. Indeed, in this regard, the most important colonial image of the Chinese was as an in-between, “middleman” community within the hierarchical social order of the colonies, who, thus positioned, would maintain the plantations through their labor and their ability to neutralize political discontent. This role is made obvious from the earliest colonial discussions of possible Chinese migration to the West Indies.

The events which have recently happened at St. Domingo [Haiti] necessarily awakes all those apprehensions which the establishment of a Negro government in that island gave rise to some years ago and render it indispensable that every practicable measure of precaution should be adopted to guard the British possessions in the West Indies as well against any future indisposition of power so constituted as against the danger of a spirit of insurrection being excited amongst the Negroes in our colonies.

It is conceived that no measure would so effectually tend to provide a security against this danger, as that of introducing a free race of cultivators into our islands, who, from habits and feelings would be kept distinct from the

Negroes, and who from interest would be inseparably attached to European proprietors.

The Chinese people are represented to unite the qualities which constitute this double recommendation.³⁴

Thus, Chinese indentured labor was described as “one of the best possible schemes” specifically because the presence of the Chinese in the colony was depicted as providing “a barrier between us and the negroes” and as “*form[ing] a middle class better capable of standing the climate than the natives of Madeira, more energetic than the East Indians and less fierce and barbarous than emigrants from the Kroo coast of Africa*” (emphasis added).³⁵

Cast in the role of middlemen in a sociopolitical buffer zone, the Chinese were depicted as existing in a somewhat blurred space between the ex-slaves and estate management. The Chinese performed substantially the same work and lived under similar conditions as the Black laboring classes, yet colonial texts take care to make a distinction between Blacks and Chinese by regularly portraying the Chinese as being free from the hostile and uncooperative attitudes of some of the Blacks, as well as the Indians, and of being largely supportive of colonial authority, particularly in confrontations between labor and estate management. For example, the 1871 Royal Commission’s Report noted with some apparent satisfaction that “[t]he Chinese, as far as we are aware, have never combined with the Indians in disturbances on the estates; but, on the other hand, have occasionally taken the side of the employer in opposing them.”³⁶ On another occasion, Chinese efforts to help quell a confrontation between Black laborers and estate management was positively recognized even though, during that incident, a Black man had been killed.³⁷

Although colonial texts differentiated between the Blacks and the Chinese, the latter were never considered to be part of the estate management class to whom they were supposedly so attached. A revealing episode in this regard are the negative descriptions of the Chinese who arrived on the *Corona*, one of

the last ships to bring Chinese migrants to Guyana in the nineteenth century. These migrants were strongly criticized for the confidence and curiosity with which they explored their new environment. They wandered about town like tourists, freely entering buildings and examining people and objects with a confidence that was clearly off-putting to the colonials they encountered. The *Royal Gazette* complained that the Chinese had demonstrated a “nonchalance amounting in some cases to positive impertinence” and had exhibited a “patronising air,” concluding that obviously the Chinese had mistaken the kindness of the colonials “for inference to themselves as persons of consequence.”³⁸ What is at issue for the colonials is that this group of migrants did not seem to understand its *place* in colonial society; that is, the Chinese did not demonstrate an acceptable level of deference toward the European colonials (the only “persons of consequence” in this society). To ensure that the lower status of the Chinese was made clear, reports on the migrants represented their curiosity as rudeness and their confidence as patronization.

CHIN-A-FOO: LITERARY ANCESTOR OF FICTIONAL CHINESE “WEST INDIANNESS”

Although colonial discourse in official state documents provides some of the context within which more contemporary images of the Chinese would be based, the true literary ancestor of the fictional representations that are at the core of this book is the character Chin-a-foo, who appears in the 1871 novel *Lutchmee and Dilloo*. He is likely the first Chinese character in the fictional landscapes of the West Indies. Chin-a-foo’s representation also reveals that the ambiguity with regard to Chinese belonging in the nineteenth-century West Indies was connected to the impact that the Chinese were perceived as having in maintaining plantation economy; that is, the Chinese were imagined as outsiders to the West Indies when their behavior threatened the plantations’ survival. The novel was written by

Edward Jenkins, a barrister as well as a satirist of some renown in the nineteenth century, who had been sent to Guyana from England by the Anti-Slavery and Aborigine Protection Societies to represent the indentured immigrants during the Royal Commission's investigation. Jenkins produced two pieces of work from that experience, *The Coolie: His Rights and Wrongs* and a three-volume novel fictionalizing the experience of indentured immigrants, *Lutchmee and Dilloo: A Study of West Indian Life*.

In *Lutchmee and Dilloo*, Jenkins complains that the Chinese are "a hopeless dead-weight to managers and overseers," suggesting that their presence in the West Indies was unnecessary or even dangerous.³⁹ This negative image of the Chinese is reinforced in the character of Chin-a-foo, where the link between the hostility that Jenkins demonstrates toward the Chinese and the significance of their perceived contribution or lack of contribution to the plantation economy is clear. Chin-a-foo runs a gambling and opium establishment that is depicted as being detrimental to the physical and economic conditions of the other laborers and, by extension, the colony itself. Indeed, Chin-a-foo has so rejected his position as an estate laborer that during slow periods at his gambling den, he chooses to support himself by hunting in the bush rather than working on the estate. In a similar manner, the long description of Chin-a-foo that accompanies his introduction in the text depicts him as physically and morally repulsive. It climaxes with the words, "concealed under the wide paejamas [*sic*], was a knife about two inches broad and fifteen long, tapering to its end, and kept in a state of suspicious brightness."⁴⁰ The concealed knife becomes a metaphor for the perceived threat that Chin-a-foo poses to the plantation because of his violent and duplicitous nature that is kept, like his knife, barely under wraps. The ugly depiction of Chin-a-foo is therefore implicated in the fact that Chin-a-foo has rejected his place on the estate. In so doing, Chin-a-foo also rejects his conceptual place in the imaginative landscapes of West Indian colonial discourse and forfeits the possibility of being imagined as a legitimate member—that is, as belonging—in colonial society.

As noted earlier, Chinese acceptance within the colonial landscape had been imagined in terms of their supposed neutralizing effect on revolutionary sentiment. In Jenkins' work, however, both Chin-a-foo and the entire Chinese community are represented as serious threats to estate management. One of the means by which Jenkins does this is by representing the Chinese as being entirely more violent and dangerous than their Indian counterparts. In the melee that occurs when an attempt is made by estate authorities to arrest Chin-a-foo, for example, the Indian participants are depicted as being quickly shamed into orderly behavior and meekly depart the scene. In contrast, the Chinese go back to their quarters where they are described as preparing "for a desperate resistance to the now inevitable visit of the police."⁴¹ Similarly, whenever the novel describes unrest among the indentured laborers, the Indians are always described as having to retrieve their weapons from their homes whereas the Chinese always seem to have their knives with them, possibly, like Chin-a-foo, simply thrust up their sleeves. This subtle distinction effectively emphasizes Jenkins' overall image of the perceived failure of the Chinese community to fulfill the buffer zone role afforded to them in colonial discourse.

Jenkins' work also undermines the status of Chinese belonging in the West Indies by representing the Chinese as not only failing in their neutralizing role but also in actually leaving their middlemen position in the sociopolitical colonial hierarchy to join the ranks of the lower masses. Thus, Jenkins repeatedly depicts the Chinese community as part of a nondescript "coolie strata," as opposed to a community that is distinctly separated from the other groups that make up plantation society, namely, Indian Coolies, Blacks, and estate management. On one occasion, for example, Jenkins suggests that the Chinese are involved in celebrating *Tadja* with the indentured migrants from India. Generally, as with many nineteenth-century West Indian texts, Jenkins distinguishes between "coolies" and "Chinese" in reference to the indentured laborers, reserving the former term for immigrants from India. The Chinese are, however, clearly

present at the formal stick fight that occurs during *Tadja* in the novel. Jenkins' description of *Tadja* as a festival in which "all coolies join in celebrating" (emphasis added) is therefore significant because the distinction between Chinese and (Indian) coolies becomes blurred.⁴² The connection between the Chinese and the Indian communities is even more evident in the chaos that occurs when estate management attempts to arrest Chin-a-foo. In this situation, both the Indians and the Chinese are depicted as fighting side-by-side against Drummond and Craig, the representatives of colonial power and authority. The division is made strikingly clear when Craig is stabbed and a cry goes up from the laborers: "Take him from *them*" (emphasis added).⁴³ In that short statement, the boundaries delineating the political and social segments of West Indian society are made clear: "us" is the laborers and "them" is estate management. There is, at this point, no middleman between the two groups, for the Chinese have aligned themselves with the Indian "coolies." Faced with uncertainty regarding the actual sociopolitical position that the Chinese would hold in the colony, it is perhaps no surprise that in the end, Jenkins situates Chin-a-foo's gambling establishment on the farthest edges of the estate, bordering the forest. In this way, Chin-a-foo is depicted as belonging neither to the "primitive" forest nor to the "civilized" estate but to an ambiguous nowhere land. In the same way, when the Chinese fail to be seen as protecting the colonial order, their place in the colonies as imagined in colonial discourse becomes blurred and ambiguous.

Jenkins' work and the other nineteenth-century texts briefly reviewed above reveal that the ambiguous portrayal of Chinese belonging articulated the interests of the colonial power. On the one hand, the Chinese were expected through their labor and political neutrality to support colonial interests, and thus could, in this role, be imagined as belonging—as insiders to West Indian spaces. On the other hand, the need to continually affirm White political and sociocultural superiority in the face of the reality that the Chinese did not always fulfill the expectations imagined for them meant that depictions of the Chinese were

sometimes very negative, representing them as unwanted additions to the colonies—as outsiders. This ambivalence in terms of affording the Chinese belonging in nineteenth-century ideas of the West Indies reflects what Edward Said describes as the “flexible *positional* superiority” that colonials tried to maintain for themselves as they produced images of the Chinese immigrants.⁴⁴ Simply, colonial images of Chinese belonging were flexible—they changed to meet the needs of colonial discourses.

This historical and discursive backdrop plays an important role in the exploration of twentieth-century fictional images of the Chinese in this book. Indeed, many colonial ideas of the Chinese would be revived and reinforced in the subsequent century in the service of nation and national discourses. In particular, this brief historical overview reveals that ideas of Chinese “outsidership” to the postindependent West Indian nations find their roots in the fact that the Chinese were specifically brought into the colonies to reinforce plantation life, as well as in their relatively short period on the plantations as laborers, and their association with colonial power in colonial discourse. This history, along with the high participation of the Chinese in the retail trade sector in the early twentieth century, made it easy for individuals trying to define the nation in both the pre- and the postindependence periods to depict the Chinese as outsiders, exploiters, and enemies of those who were being defined as the nation. But the ambivalence that characterized nineteenth-century depictions of the Chinese is also present in more contemporary fictional depictions of the Chinese. In particular, it does not always suit national narratives to cast the Chinese in the role of oppressor and outsider. Depicting the Chinese as insiders to West Indian spaces by focusing on their shared history and culture with other West Indians, becomes a powerful way of asserting the existence of a unique West Indian cultural identity in a way that mirrors the nineteenth century’s use of images of Chinese assimilation to confirm the superiority of the colonial “civilization.”

In the subsequent chapters, I explore a spectrum of fictional

images that portray Chinese belonging in West Indian literary texts, aiming to illustrate their relationship to the construction of national identities. In Chapter 1, I set out my theoretical approach to examining the literary representation of Chinese in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana. I argue for thinking of nation as the cultural product of *narratives* (rather than *a narrative*). In the case of the West Indies, two narratives are dominant: one that articulates nation in terms of struggle against oppression and the other, in terms of creolization. I also suggest that the idea of national literature be reconceptualized as a site of symbolic performances—albeit banal performances—where various narratives of national identity take place. I argue that the representation of the Chinese is analogous to stock characters in such performances in that they identify which genre of national narrative is being performed. In Chapters 2 and 3, I examine a wide range of West Indian literary texts, exploring how their images of the Chinese situate the Chinese as both outside and inside the imaginative boundaries of nation. I suggest that this ambivalence is characteristic of the fact that nation exists in multiple narratives. Chapter 4 explores how self-representations of Chineseness complicate national narratives of belonging. I pay particular attention to how the diasporic paradigm affects the construction of identity. In the Conclusion, I consider the questions that this research raises for future explorations of nation in general and, more specifically, for the Chinese in the West Indies.

Overall, this book is an exploration into the meaning of “Mr. Chin”—that is, an attempt to read behind the reductive stereotypical images of the Chinese in the West Indies as is perhaps most overtly expressed in the common nickname for Chinese shopkeepers in the West Indies, “Mr. Chin.” Before we can begin this search for Mr. Chin, however, we would do well to keep in mind a number of caveats. First, there has been little critical interrogation into the literary representations of the Chinese in the West Indies. There lacks, in other words, a strong literary tradition of interrogating “Chineseness” in the West Indies, a

situation complicated by the fact that many of the authors studied in this investigation have not reached a high level of international acclaim. Of course, such authors as V. S. Naipaul or Samuel Selvon have generated much critical attention; however, such work does not consider how Chineseness is manifested in their fiction. In contrast, Asian American literary critics have long been dealing with many of the issues that this book addresses. I have therefore placed their work into dialogue with my analysis of Chinese “West Indianness,” a decision that I hope will also encourage a more widespread engagement with “Asian-ness” in the Americas in general. To that end, I also situate this research in comparison with the growing field of research on Chinese experience in Cuba, particularly in light of the fact that both the Chinese Cuban communities and the Chinese communities of the West Indies entered these regions in about the same period and under similar conditions. Finally, despite the somewhat broad regional and chronological scope of this study, I want to emphasize that the experience of the Chinese in the West Indies—indeed in the Caribbean in general—is not homogeneous. Significant differences exist between the experience of the Chinese in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana and in the ways in which nationhood was achieved in all three regions. It is in this sense that I consider this work to be laying the foundation for more specific research into the Chinese of each nation and into “nation-ness” itself. This investigation does, however, provide us with a starting point for searching for Mr. Chin, that is, for considering the cultural impact that the presence of the Chinese has had on the construction of West Indian national identities and, more broadly on a new aspect of Chineseness in the Americas. In doing so, this study situates itself in the “deep and lengthy process of disclosure, one of unfixing entrenched binaries: slave versus free, black versus white, East versus West, Pacific versus Atlantic” with regard to our understanding of Chineseness, Americanness, and West Indianness.⁴⁵